

WHAT IS A GRADE? Part 2
Susan Bell, Superintendent of Schools
Windsor Locks Public Schools

This is Part 2 of a 4-part series on the subject of grading in public schools

A question arose after Part 1 was distributed. Here is the answer to that question

Q: Is this another **NEW** way the district is grading students?

A: **Absolutely NOT** - Part 1 is the “traditional” form of grading that we are moving away from. What I tried to highlight in that was the fact that averaging a student’s grades on assignments and other components of a grade does not give a clear indication of what they have learned over time. Instead, the average only dilutes where the student ended up in terms of mastery of concepts and skills taught.

That being said, here’s Part 2!

The unanticipated effect of including “behaviors” in an overall grade

Let’s take this concept of traditional “grading” a step further and answer the question – what actually makes up a traditional (not standards-based grades) marking period grade? The answer might be, at first, the assignment grades such as those included in Part 1. But think again. In a traditional learning and grading system, grades could be made up of “percentages” of different aspects deemed important by the teacher, school and/or district. For instance, a teacher’s course syllabus at the high school level might read something like this:

Component of marking period grade	Method of arriving at the grade for each component	Percentage of quarter grade
Participation in class	At least once each class period the student participates in some way	10% of quarter grade
Homework completion	When teacher checks, homework is complete (not checked for quality or understanding)	30% of quarter grade
Classwork completion	Handed in and checked off as completed	20% of quarter grade
Tests, quizzes	Completed at various times throughout the quarter, all grades averaged together	40% of quarter grade

Let's consider a scenario for a hypothetical student:

Component	Grade	Percentage of final grade	Points toward final grade
Participation Grade	100	10	10
Homework Completion	100	30	30
Classwork Completion	100	20	20
Tests and Quizzes (averaged)	65	40	26
		Final Average	86 (B/B+)

The problem with this picture is – this grade includes the grades of 100 for homework completion, 100 for classwork completion, and 100 for participation in class. These elements of the grade reflect student BEHAVIORS. Their ability to complete and hand in homework, complete and hand in classwork, and to participate in class are all behaviors. If the homework, classwork, and participation are not evaluated according to the learning expectations established for the quarter, they are simply a measure of a student's compliance with their teacher's and/or school's behavioral expectations.

The test and quiz grade included in the overall average gets completely watered down by the inclusion of these behaviors and the percentages they represent in the final grade. In reality, we have a student who is struggling with learning academic content and skills, but because of their ability to comply with behavioral expectations, receives a grade that is not reflective AT ALL of their skills and knowledge in that subject area.

These behaviors are IMPORTANT. They are the essential HABITS that learners should use to aid in learning. But they are NOT a representation of learning itself. These habits are distinct skills that must be separated from a grade that represents a student's acquisition of knowledge and skills related to specific subject areas. Only then can we ensure that students are moving on to the next grade, or to college and career, with the essential knowledge and skills already mastered to do well.

In the next installment, I will talk more about those HABITS of Scholarship that Windsor Locks Public Schools now report on separately in order to clarify students' progress in mastering academic standards. Stay tuned!